

Cool unsettled weather persisted. It was Wednesday, May 22 and I was finally on the road. I had postponed a trip to collect photos for a story entitled Just Passing Through in this issue, while waiting for a promising weather forecast. I also planned to visit a few wildlife refuges.

Because of deadlines, I decided to go on the road in spite of a less-than-ideal forecast for the north-central and north-western part of the state. Temperatures were supposed to drop sharply and the National Weather Service predicted freezing temperatures and snow in the north-west by Thursday morning.

My loosely planned route would take me to three national wildlife refuges, some pre-selected spots in the far north-western part of the state, then south to the Beach area by Thursday night. I would hit Theodore Roosevelt National Park early Friday and work my way home by late afternoon.



Day 1

I left Bismarck and drove east to Steele on back roads until I hit state Highway 3 and followed it north to its intersection with U.S. Highway 2 at Rugby. Pelicans drew my attention to their resting place on a shallow marsh and I stopped to admire them. I saw my first brood of Canada geese along the shoreline of a receding marsh between Sterling and Steele. There were six goslings and two protective parents. The birds scurried across a mud flat, the strong south wind bending the feathers on the backs and tails of the adult birds as they moved north to the water's edge.

I took a few shots and continued on to Steele where I inspected the "World's Largest Sandhill Crane" sculpture. When I turned north on Highway 3 the wind was at my back. There were plenty of ducks and abundant water areas, but it was apparent that the lack of late summer rain last year and little winter runoff was starting to having an effect on roadside water and the shallow wetlands used as brood rearing habitat.

I promised myself a visit to some small towns, communities with familiar names, like Balta and Silva, south of Rugby, an area that is an early stopover for sandhill cranes during their fall migration into North Dakota. After a brief stop at Balta Dam, I continued north to Rugby and west on U.S. 2 to the Mouse River at Towner and north on Highway 14 to Upham and the J. Clark Salyer National Wildlife Refuge.

Flooded meadows north and west of the Mouse River bridge at Towner surprised me. I surmised it was the result of a moisture-laden spring storm that dropped 16-18 inches of snow in the area around Dunseith and St. John, a natural boost to flood irrigation.

I had not been to Salyer refuge since October 1990 and I tried to remember



Windblown Canada geese



White pelicans

some of the places I'd visited when researching a story on the Civilian Conservation Corps and its development work on Lower Souris National Wildlife Refuge in the 1930s. The refuge was later renamed in honor of J. Clark Salyer, a former biology teacher in Minot, who became the Chief of Refuges for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

I went to refuge headquarters north of Upham to begin the 22-mile scenic auto tour route that would eventually take me back to Highway 14. A male ruddy duck in full breeding plumage skimmed along in deep water near the roadside, its fan-shaped tail held at 90 degrees. Its bill, normally gray-black during fall and winter, was now a bright, pool-cue-chalk blue. Ruddy ducks prefer to dive rather than fly when alarmed and this one was no different. I took several photos and moved when he dove, trying to anticipate where he would come up. Eventually he tired of me and moved into nearby vegetation on the other side of the road ditch.

Two anglers were fishing the river at Dam Number 1 near the trail. Dam Number 1 was built by the Civilian Conservation Corps in 1936 to maintain water levels in the river and divert water to a nearby marsh. It was a nice place to

spend a few hours fishing, but on this day unless one had wet weather gear, the stay would be short. The sky had darkened and the first rain drops hit me as I prepared to photograph the water coming over the old rubble masonry. It wasn't long before the rain drove me back into my vehicle and down the road toward Highway 14.

A brief gap between showers allowed me to take advantage of some photo opportunities, but by the time I reached the narrow bridge spanning Willow Creek, it was raining hard and I scrapped plans to rerun the scenic tour back to refuge headquarters, choosing instead to try to make it to Minot, then on to Kenmare and Des Lacs National Wildlife Refuge before sundown.

I left Minot about 7 p.m., thinking I could take advantage of some soft evening light, but the farther north I drove, the more ominous the sky. I considered a side trip to Upper Souris National Wildlife Refuge near Foxholm but the light was so poor there was little point. A major road construction project on Highway 52 slowed my progress and by the time I reached Kenmare it was too late to do much but hope the next day's weather was better.

As predicted the wind switched to the northwest and the temperature was dropping fast. There were winter storm warnings for parts of northern Montana. What would tomorrow bring?



Ruddy duck at J.Clark Salyer National Wildlife Refuge

Day 2

Snow on the ground. Temperatures in the low 20s. Not your typical late-May morning. Rain that had fallen overnight had coated my windshield with serious ice before sprinkling it with snow. The ground was white.

I decided to spend the early morning hours exploring the Des Lacs refuge. As gray clouds began to move out, the sun began its fight to brighten the day. I drove north through the woods along the refuge. A wild turkey gobbler crossed the road and disappeared. Shortly thereafter, a white-tailed doe crossed and moved up the tree-covered hillside without stopping to look back. A huge white-tailed buck, velvet antlers already prominent, stared at me from across a wooded ravine. He bolted as I stopped to get a better look. It was an interesting drive and one I thought might give me some opportunities for woodland song birds, but it was not to be.

Cedar waxwings near Kenmare.



Mallard pair at Des Lacs National Wildlife Refuge

I wondered about the effect of cold temperatures on birds that relied on insects for food. I had heard rumors of dead martins and warblers, but had yet to see any evidence myself.

I drove south of Kenmare along a refuge tour route seeking a trail to higher ground where I could take some photos of the Des Lacs River Valley. On my way back I noticed a large flock of birds alongside the road. They turned out to be cedar waxwings gorging on Russian olives. I spent about 45 minutes watching, waiting, and taking pictures while they decided I wasn't much of a threat.

Lostwood National Wildlife Refuge

It had been seven years since I last visited Lostwood National Wildlife Refuge north of Stanley. In June 1995 the Lostwood prairie was green and alive with grassland birds and waterbirds. There were lots of avocets and marbled godwits. Wild roses were particularly beautiful that year.

Conditions were different now. The late-May prairie was in sharp contrast to what it will become when warm weather and rain accelerates growth. The green growth of prescribed burns was in sharp contrast to the browns of last year's grass. I saw few shorebirds and no avocets or godwits, but there were plenty of ducks and coots. A few sharp-tailed grouse still



Bullion Butte from Highway 16 east of G olva.

lingered by the roadside even though it was close to noon. When I left the refuge, I had the feeling that many of the migrant birds that live here during summer and fall had yet to arrive.

I reached Highway 5 north of Bowbells and headed straight west toward Fortuna to check on an impression of one of the travelers referenced in the article *Just Passing Through*. I found the country described by William Least Heat Moon and imagined him looking out over the same expansive grain fields that I photographed for this story. The view of the countryside from Highway 5 in the northeast corner of the state was familiar to me, and now just east of Fortuna, I was better able to appreciate the impressions of a traveler who chose to cross the state on its northern edge as opposed to Interstate 94, the route most traveled. I respected his choice.

West of Fortuna I turned south toward Highway 2 west of Williston. It was a long stretch of highway without many options to fill up with gasoline. I checked my gas gauge and decided I had enough to get to Williston and still allow for a quick side trip to Writing Rock State Historic Site, a few miles off the highway north of Grenora. Long story short: I visited the Writing Rock site and drove into Williston on vapors with the needle below the red low-fuel mark. I discovered, much to my chagrin, after the point of no return, that the fuel gauge needle drops more quickly at the bottom end.

A mid-afternoon fuel stop at Williston and I was on my way south in search of

opportunities to photograph antelope. I did see several antelope, but they were too far to bother with considering the time left in the day and the fact that I wanted to be south of Beach for the sun-down run. I stopped at Sather Dam and photographed pelicans. I next went to Leland Dam, about 10 miles south of Sather. It is a nice little spot to fish for bluegills, bass and rainbow trout. The only fisher there was an osprey. It was perched on a large tree branch over the water and high enough to sight fish which are its main source of food. I got as close as I could without scaring it and took advantage of the only opportunity presented. The osprey is a rare breeder in North Dakota and I suspected this one had stopped to seek a meal before continuing its migration north into Canada.

Dams are often a prime source of water in western North Dakota so it is not uncommon to find wildlife utilizing them. My next stop was at Odland Dam north of Beach where I found birds in a frenzy over a recent hatch of delicate flies that had probably responded to the warming temperatures of afternoon. Tiny warblers flitted through leafing trees alongside the trail to the dam. Black terns and kingbirds actively pursued clouds of insects, above the grass along the shoreline. It was a picnic and all were invited.

After securing a motel room in Beach, I headed south hoping to find some antelope. I found a few, but they were skittish. I snapped a few frames before heading back to sleep away the dark spell.



Above: Osprey at Leland Dam in McKenzie County

Below: Pronghorn buck about to crawl under a pasture fence south of Beach.



Day 3

Shortly after 5 a.m., cup of coffee in place, I drove east into the rising sun on my way to the south unit of Theodore Roosevelt National Park. The sun was bright, but not yet high enough to light the Little Missouri Valley floor. I drove into Medora and the entrance to the park. The town was quiet and without traffic. The park itself was showing signs that the tourist season was close at hand. Work on a campground extension and the loop road was in progress. Vehicles were parked alongside the road, as if abandoned, quite likely campers or hikers taking advantage of the cool weather and the uncrowded surroundings.

Activity at the horse corrals on the north edge of the park indicated preparations were being made for a trail ride. Pickups pulling horse trailers were a common sight by mid-morning. More visitors began to show up at the park's prairie dog towns. Prairie dog pups were plentiful and it was fun to watch them play among themselves. When adults sensed danger they would sound the alarm and pups would scurry to the safety of their burrows.

Visitor traffic increased by late morning so I headed back to Medora and east toward home. At the Fryburg interchange I got off Interstate 94 and headed south to find a cross-country route to Highway 85 north into Belfield. The elusive pronghorn was my subject of choice, but once again I was thwarted.

A few miles west of Mandan, I followed a gravel road south near the Heart



Prairie dog sounds danger alarm.

River on a hunch I might find some wild turkeys. I saw two gobblers strutting in a field near the edge of the woods. A trail wound back through the trees but the open gate was posted to trespass and it was too late to find the owner. A couple of turkeys and a pair of mourning doves allowed me a couple of shots before I headed back to Bismarck to drop off my exposed film.

I had packed a lot of activity into my three days in May, and still didn't see all the places I wanted to visit. The trip was refreshing and full of variety. I saw interesting

country and lots of wildlife. Every place I went spring was trying to take hold. I can still smell the freshly burned vegetation of the Lostwood prescribed burn. The aroma of badland's cedar is still with me a week after my return. Butte primroses, pasque flowers and Juneberries were just beginning to bloom in the badlands. Spring was late, but it was here.

Refuge scenic routes and other byways of rural North Dakota, lightly traveled this time of year, are perfect destinations for those interested in nature photography or bird watching. Seasonal transformation on the Great Plains is vested in its plants and animals and the variety of habitats necessary for them to prosper. Within this transformation is a subtle beauty that is often fleeting unless one takes the time to look for it. The photos that accompany this essay represent a fraction of what I saw in just three days in May.

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Prairie dog pups gather at a burrow.



Coyote in early morning

